

"PLAY WORDS": CHINESE CHARACTERS IN JAPANESE CONVERSATIONAL JOKING

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What is wordplay? Wordplay is art, yet it is also intellectual play. It demands not only a sense of humor and poetry, but also a knowledge of orthography or even mathematics. Crossword puzzles show a certain geometrical beauty, while riddles have rhymes: both involve playful uses of words that one might almost call "language on vacation." Crossword puzzles illustrate the written style of wordplay (orthographic) while riddles or puns illustrate a spoken style (oral). In this paper, which examines Japanese wordplays based on the use and knowledge of Chinese ideographic characters, my focus is on how people utilize orthographic knowledge to make oral word games in ordinary conversation. (1)

I will call such usage "play word," for it differs from Price and Sherzer's notion of play language. The study of play language investigates the structured rules of speech play (grammar, syllable, pitch, etc.), and play language is defined as follows:

Play languages are not games, strictly speaking. Play languages are not necessarily or exclusively used for purposes of secrecy.

Not all methods of disguising speech need produce play languages (Sherzer 1976: 20).

Like play languages, "play word" may reveal something significant about the ethnography of speaking and the sociolinguistic patterns of a community, and the characteristics of "play word" and play languages are similar. Yet "play word" is unstructured and used anywhere in conversation, and it may be at one point a clue to folk group identity, at another a means to shift the conversation to a different level, and at still another a euphemism for a taboo subject.

Each Chinese character has its own meaning and pronunciations. For instance, the character 木 means "tree," and it can be pronounced "ki," "moku," or "boku." These ways of pronunciation depend on which character it connects to before or after. Although some characters have only one pronunciation, Chinese characters will usually vary in pronunciation depending on whether they are just one character or a combination of characters. An example illustrates this feature of Chinese. The words in parentheses indicate quasi-Chinese, Japanese-Chinese, and Japanese pronunciation.

What is the south metropolis?

"south:" 南 (nan; nan; minami) + "metropolis:" 京 (kin; kei; kyo) = 南京 (nankin) (i.e. Nanking, China).

What is the north metropolis?

"north:" 北 (pe; hoku; kita) + "metropolis:" 京 (kin; kei; kyo) = 北京 (pekin) (i.e. Peking, China).

These two questions can be answered without difficulty by Japanese. Yet they serve to disguise the answer to the last question:

What is the east metropolis?

"east:" 東 (ton; to; higashi) + "metropolis:" 京 (kin; kei; kyo) = 東京 (tokyo) (i.e. Tokyo, Japan).

The answerers are deceived because the pronunciation of the first two answers should resemble the pronunciation "nankin" and "pekin," leading to the third answer: "tonkin." Although "tonkin" is possible, there is no 東京 in China. One must follow the Japanese pronunciation system "tokyo." The wordplay involves selection from the various pronunciations of one character.

The play with Chinese characters also involves the invention of new characters. While most characters are built of heterogeneous parts, these parts are separated from each other and reconstructed into a different or totally new character. Using the character 木 ("tree"), a new character can be created.

What is a spring tree?

"tree" 木 + "spring" 春 = 椿 ("camelia")

What is a summer tree?

"tree" 木 + "summer" 夏 = 楸 ("nettle tree")

What is a fall tree?

"tree" 木 + "fall" 秋 = 楸 ("Japanese catalpa")

What is a winter tree?

"tree" 木 + "winter" 冬 = 栂 ("holly")

Apparently these questions are a decoy for the last interrogation:

What is a year tree?

"tree" 木 + "year" 年 = 栂 (?).

The new character 栂 absolutely does not exist. Hence, answerers can get confused, as the questioner expects. They may say it is an evergreen tree, like pine, which is one possible answer. As this play is supposed to be light-hearted or even ludicrous, however, the answer must be "a plastic tree."

As we can see, there are several techniques in the wordplays with Chinese characters, but three techniques predominate: oral, semantic, and orthographic wordplays. "Play words," where they are created from those wordplays, can also be placed into these categories. It should be noted that these "play words" do not necessarily have these functions in conversation. These categories just indicate their origins or backgrounds.

First, oral wordplay shifts the meaning to another sign with the same phoneme or pronunciation. For example:

What is 木? Answer: "tree."

What is 林? Answer: "forest."

What is 森? Answer: "jungle."

And then, what is 森?

The answer is "Don't pay too much attention," or "Don't worry."

The character 森 itself does not exist. Therefore, it is natural to say, "Unlike the character

森 (jungle), the character 森 does not make sense. The fourth tree is needless. Don't use 木 ("ki") too much."

The command, "Don't use 木 ("ki") too much," is the key to this wordplay. In Japanese, it is "Yokeina 'ki' (木) o tsukauna." However, just by listening to that, the Japanese cannot get the message "Don't use 木 ("ki") too much," but comprehend the command, "Don't use 気 ("ki") too much." Since there is no other choice in the meaning of "Yokeina kio tsukauna," it automatically turns out to be "Don't use 気 ("ki") too much." The character 気 means "attention" or "care." Hence, in translation, it becomes "Don't pay too much attention" or "Don't worry" in free translation.

This punning "play word" is crystallized into the simple phrase, "the fourth tree" in conversation. In other words, saying the symbolic phrase "the fourth tree" comes to possess the same meaning as saying "Don't pay too much attention" or "Don't worry." People may use this phrase and know its meaning whether or not they share the knowledge of the wordplay which is its background.

It is possible to apply the expression in a hypothetical dialogue:

- A: Hello. How are you?
 B: Fine. Long time no see.
 A: Yeah. Well, what are you going to do Saturday night?
 B: I haven't decided yet.
 A: Do you want to go and see "Indiana Jones?"
 B: Oh! Yeah!
 A: But you want to go there with your girlfriend, don't you?
 B: It's just "the fourth tree." I will take her there another time.

In this conversation, B wants to say, "Don't worry," in the phrase "the fourth tree." Thus, the character which has the nature of a pun in written wordplay is shifted into the symbolic world of expressive idiom.

Second, the semantic "play word" involves the symbolization of a particular character or element which is a construct of a larger character. For example, the character 广 (yamaidare)-

a classifier with respect to linguistic terms which means "disease"--cannot exist by itself. It needs another character:

"disease" 疒 + "knowledge" 知 = 痴 ("madness").

"disease" 疒 + "arrow" (fast) 矢 = 疾 ("the disease which we get fast").

If a person says, "I am Yamaidare," his listener may immediately understand that he is sick. But the listener does not know what kind of sickness it is. The following conversation may help to clarify this semantic "play word."

A: Hey, how are you doing?

B: O.K. I got Yamaidare.

A: Wow, take it easy. But what kind?

B: Hayashi (林 = "forest"). /He means "homesickness"/

A: What? Hayashi? Uh-hen. /He thinks it means the "clap"/ Who gave you such a disease?

B: What do you mean? I don't know.

A: What! You don't know! You're really in trouble now. You got 'Hayashi;' you should know from whom.

B: Wait! I think you misunderstood me. I said, "I got 'Hayashi,'" not 'HAYASHI.' You see?

A: All right. I think I got it. Anyway, how is it?

B: Oh, Mori (森 = "jungle").

Although the classifier 疒 ("yamaidare") and the character 林 ("hayashi": forest) cannot be combined into the character 痲, they give the clue to the receiver to search for the right character 淋, which is what the sender means. The character 淋, while it does not have the disease classifier, expresses loneliness. Furthermore, especially among men, it may also mean gonorrhea (or the "clap"), because it is a component part of the representation (淋病). Thus, the clue "hayashi" (forest) is still vague and perplexing for the receiver because of the double meaning of the character 淋, though it may be comprehensible in a certain context.

In addition, the same technique of indirect expression is applied in the last word of the hypothetical discourse:

"disease" 疒 + "jungle" 森 = 瘴 (?).

While the disease-jungle character does not exist either, it is possible for B to say, "Mori" (jungle), in this situation. Since "jungle" is larger than "forest" in terms of Chinese characters, on the basis that the participants agree that the disease-forest character means "homesickness," the term "jungle" signifies that B is severely homesick.

This semantic technique of indirect expression may be called "euphemism." Euphemism is a compensating strategy in language to skirt the taboo word (Adler 1978: 73). It is a softener of communication to send prohibited messages among a certain folk group. Euphemisms are society's basic *lingua non franca*, and they are outward and visible signs of our inward anxieties, conflicts, fears, and shames (Rawson 1981: 1). Nonetheless, euphemisms are created not merely by people's anxieties and fears; the spirit of "play word" seems to be hidden somewhere behind the creation of euphemisms. People may enjoy competing in the invention of euphemisms. Euphemism, whether positive or negative, is a special code of communication recognized as one type of semantic "play words."

Third, the visual type of "play word" seems to be the most demanding technical "play word" with Chinese characters. In order to understand the sender's strategy, the receiver has to re-visualize the verbalized image of the character from the sender. Let us examine the visualistic "play word" of "foolish" as "the closed gate." In Japanese, "foolish" is "manuke" (間抜け) "Ma" (間) means "space" or "timing," and "nuke" (抜) refers to the verb "omit" or "miss." When the physical space is omitted from the character 間, it may be transmuted into the next figure 門. In a written word game, the answerer is requested to guess the meaning of the figure 門, with no hint or suggestion. Needless to say, this figure cannot be recognized as a Chinese character. When people verbalize it, it is twisted and shifted in complex ways. Since the figure 門 is very close to the character 門 (gate) in shape, it becomes "the closed gate." Consequently, the expression of "foolish" is signified as "the closed gate." The receiver,

when he obtains the message of "the closed gate," tries to visualize what the closed gate is, with the character of "gate" (門). Then, he notices the real message hidden within the symbolic phrase.

Figuratively, the following dialog can be used to illustrate this "play word:"

- A: What are you doing here?
 B: I'm trying to hold the moon in the pool.
 A: Oh, you "closed gate."
 B: Yeah, I didn't forget to close the gate.
 A: No! It means "foolish." If the gate is closed, you cannot know what is happening outside. Understand?
 B: O.K. By the way, who are you? How did you get here?
 A:

The source of this dialog is my friend's "Rakugo" (2) performance of a short story when we were in college. While B suggests a different etymology of the metaphor "the closed gate," I have never heard the explanation, but I have participated in the wordplay of "the closed gate." The words "the closed gate" may operate as a mollification in utterance.

It is noticeable that even though both oral wordplay and "play words" are for fun and entertainment, their qualities and performers are different. Wordplays are an opportunity and/or material for folk education. "Play words" are a crystal of knowledge. The latter does not need a special setting, where the former requires it. Unlike wordplays, "play words" are performed mainly by those who are senior-high and college students or older. There must be a certain relationship between the development of language skill and "play words." In other words, the use of certain "play words" may indicate the achievement of a particular stage of mental and linguistic development.

In addition, the relationship between sender and receiver activated through these "play words" is a joking relationship. The "play words" with Chinese characters seldom appear between parents and children, or between people of different social classes. They occur between associates within folk groups.

To sum up, "play words" with Chinese characters can be euphemistic, figurative, or metaphorical. They are used in conversation within certain folk groups. Although the distinctive patterns of "play words" and their functions in discourse are still obscure, this study, I believe, has the potential of describing the ethnography of Japanese speaking from the viewpoint of unstructured idiomatic expressions. While contemporary folklorists and ethnographers are focusing on structures and patterns in speech, using linguistic tools, it may be significant to study the characteristics of the unstructured elements and the inter-relationship between the structured and unstructured in speech as another approach towards the ethnography of speaking.

NOTES

1. Due to the lack of natural context in Bloomington, the data for this paper stems from my own memory and from metacommentaries by fellow Japanese students.
2. Rakugo is a traditional Japanese professional storytelling form. The dialog which I have quoted forms the introduction to the main performance, which discusses the foolish man's success.